

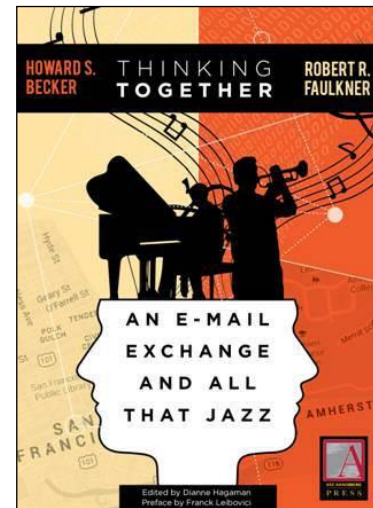
Howard S. Becker and Robert R. Faulkner, **Thinking Together: An E-Mail Exchange and All That Jazz**, Los Angeles, CA: USC Annenberg Press, 2013, 172 pp., \$5.99 (e-book).

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To convey the flavor of the unique e-book that I am reviewing here, I am commencing this essay in an unusual fashion—with a story about thinking about how to introduce it. In my first attempt to write an opening line, I began with the sentiment that the process of creating new knowledge and writing up research is often a daunting, mysterious task. I chose this opening because I found it to be a useful way to highlight the distinct pedagogical utility of **Thinking Together: An E-Mail Exchange and All That Jazz**, which offers an incredibly rare look into the “career” of an idea by reconstructing the entire corpus of e-mail correspondence that Howard Becker and Robert Faulkner produced over three years of puzzling through the question that animates their 2009 book *Do You Know . . . ? The Jazz Repertoire in Action*: How do jazz musicians who may have never played together—or who may have never even met—pull off playing a competent performance with no set list? This got me to thinking about how published works seldom offer any trace of the practices that constructed them, which led me to try out a new introductory sentence that invoked commodity fetishism to make this point. However, being dissatisfied with this cute, gratuitous allusion to Marx, I returned my cursor to the top of the screen and began with a summary of *Do You Know*. After all, I reasoned, *Thinking Together* derives much of its meaning and value from illuminating the back stage machinations that resulted in the thesis and organization of *Do You Know*. But this felt problematic to me because placing the printed, bound product of Becker and Faulkner’s years of collaboration at the forefront risked reifying *Do You Know* as a commodity fetish. Frustrated again, I deleted all of the text and wondered whether I ought to make an outline of the review before attempting to write it.

Returning to the actual content of the e-mails between Becker and Faulkner, however, made the proverbial light bulb go off. I immediately grasped a lesson as valuable as those offered by Becker (1986) in *Writing for the Social Sciences*. Apropos of *Thinking Together*, I spelled out this insight in an e-mail to a distant colleague with whom I am collaborating on an article:

In short, I am a fan of moving forward in whatever way is most efficient for us given our [many!] other obligations—sometimes that might mean writing a draft of an entire section, but I also think we could move things along in smaller increments or in the interim by e-mailing more inchoate ideas/questions to each other through regular e-mail correspondence that spark each other to think it further and write back. It’s funny, I am reviewing an e-book by Howie Becker and Robert Faulkner which is really just a collection of all their e-mails that went into writing the book, *Do You Know . . . ?*; but it is



amazing to see how much of the actual book writing and major ideas were created through relatively short e-mail exchanges that took place in between drafting major sections. I have never really done this--my collaborations thus far have been phone/face to face conversations, then breaking for formal writing, then sharing writing; but I think Becker/Faulkner are onto something that could facilitate collaborating more efficiently . . . (personal correspondence, January 7, 2014)

As Becker writes in his blurb of *Thinking Together*, it “shows the authors exchanging ideas and modifying them as the conversation proceeds . . . all the thinking that goes on when you actually do research.” The freeform, free association, trial and error character of these e-mails is not ancillary to the authors’ task of “serious” academic thinking and writing—which, in my experience of coauthoring, is usually cordoned off from the profane body of e-mails (finding its home in the more formal, structured prose reserved for a Word or PDF attachment); these e-mails *are* the serious academic thinking and writing. As I hope you, the reader, have grasped, I am trying to enact this very approach here by incorporating my (largely internal) conversations about how to go about writing this review into the review itself.

Of course, one can seldom if ever get away with presenting off-the-cuff thoughts—in e-mail form or otherwise—as serious scholarship. But the point, which I find as comforting and inspiring as the sage advice that Becker (1986, 1998) has famously doled out in his “how to” books, is that we can actually accomplish quite a lot of academic thinking and writing through the activities (e.g., e-mailing, perhaps even texting) and during the times (e.g., five minutes before class) that we normally experience as separate from and subordinate to the dedicated moments that we struggle to set aside for doing “real” work. This trick is not one that the authors conscientiously articulate in their exchanges; rather, it is built into the architecture of *Thinking Together*. We see, for instance, Faulkner tentatively trying out whether Sewell, Jr.’s (1992) “hip AJS piece” on structure and agency is useful for thinking about how practicing musicians refashion the conventional jazz repertoire (Becker responds that invoking Sewell would obfuscate more than it would illuminate, asking “What’s the big fucking deal?” about people having “agency” and characteristically grouching that fancy sociological concepts are too often unrelated to “real stuff.”). And we witness them hash out, through mundane reflections on their own jazz performances that sometimes seem like mere asides (Becker plays piano and Faulkner plays trumpet), the “units of analysis” (songs, players, and job situations) that will eventually become the “basic elements” that interact to shape the “working repertoire” of a group of jazz musicians, as discussed in chapter 2 of *Do You Know* (Faulkner & Becker, 2009, pp. 17–36).

While *Thinking Together* may ostensibly be a mere prelude to *Do You Know*, it actually engages with a broader set of sociologically relevant questions than does the polished book. I walked away from *Do You Know* feeling that I would have liked a little more guidance about how understanding the creation, enactment, reproduction, and alteration of the jazz repertoire helps us think about other kinds of “culture in action” (Faulkner and Becker do little more than note that repertoire (understood as a “process”) “gives us a flexible tool for understanding forms of collective action” (2009, p. 192)). But there are many moments in *Thinking Together* where the authors spell out how their notion of repertoire contributes to cultural theory. Regarding Swidler’s (1986) toolkit approach, Faulkner remarks,

But what determines the repertoire or tunes in the musician's toolkit in the first place? Culture doesn't do shit and it certainly doesn't automatically shape action (her point) but players in concerted action, solving practical and musical problems, shape or sculpt the repertoire from which to select and play tunes. There is definitely more critical deliberation to actively selecting the repertoire by agents in roles.

Faulkner adds that "change in tunes on the list and tunes played poses a problem for institutional theorists, most of whom view institutions as the source of stability and order." This prompts Becker to respond that "one thing that's wrong with the idea of 'toolkit' is that it doesn't really leave room for adding to, deleting, forgetting, and all the other operations that change its content. . . . Another thing is that people who talk this way are generally talking about the toolkit as just being there for this person or that to use, and don't seem to pay much attention to the collective character of its use." The payoff comes several pages later when Becker formalizes this conversation in a nice summary of their sociological contribution—one that they worked up for their successful National Science Foundation (NSF) proposal but that was not spelled out in *Do You Know*:

Numerous studies have shown how routines and repertoires, established tunes, and various commercial and artistic factors determine the pool of available resources. Less is known about how tunes are chosen from the available pool, prioritized (if you will) in terms of working strategy or placed on the list, actually arranged within the set's agenda, and then enacted or performed by the players in coordination with one another. Moreover, studies addressing the subject of repertoire have adopted, it seems to us, a limited analytic perspective that overlooks much of the social process of repertoire in action, or, better, repertoire in interaction.

Thinking Together also helpfully lays out methodological conundrums, and practical solutions, that are only hinted at in *Do You Know*. In particular, they show the strength of pairing interviews and observations, as well as the dangers of relying solely on one or the other. On the one hand, Becker and Faulkner found that many of the musicians they interviewed could not recall the suite of songs—the working repertoire—that comprised their most recent performance, and that they were routinely unable to explain how they "faked" their way through playing a song that they did not know. This led the authors to conclude that it is impossible to "infer repertoire from the output" (i.e., a post hoc interview)—it "has to be studied in situ." On the other hand, they found that interviews are crucial because "what is spoken about repertoire is embedded in [people's] stories, anecdotes, and past experiences of gigs," and because there are limits to inferring how musicians negotiate the working repertoire together simply by watching them do it. This led them to develop the strategy of pausing—breaking the flow of performances—to ask participants what they just did. Becker writes of this method of combining verbal data (both formal interviews and spontaneous questions) with situated observations of players negotiating a performance,

It's so simple, but it means that you have learned an enormous amount in about three seconds that you would have a lot of trouble learning in even the most unstructured interview (because this involves multiple people), let alone imagine trying to build this

possibility into a questionnaire or interview schedule!

There is one other key way in which *Thinking Together* is instructive: it gives the lie to the enduring myth that “real” social science research always begins with hypotheses derived from a priori theoretical concerns. Although Becker and Faulkner actually received an NSF grant for this research, *Thinking Together* powerfully illustrates the point of Becker’s (2009) polemic [How to Find Out How to Do Qualitative Research](#), in which he complained that the NSF only funds research proposals that mimic the logic of deductive science even though

researchers can’t know ahead of time all the questions they will want to investigate, what theories they will ultimately find relevant to discoveries made during the research, or what methods will produce the information needed to solve the newly discovered problems. (para. 12)

What *Thinking Together* offers is the rare opportunity to actually observe how this discovery process happens (the closest we usually get are retrospective accounts in a methods appendix or an edited volume).

I must confess to feeling that there are some ways in which I am far from the ideal reviewer—or audience—for *Thinking Together*. Because I know little about jazz and do not play any instruments, a large portion of the conversations struck me as “inside baseball”—for example, in-depth discussions of a song’s chord progressions or the key it ought to be played in and friendly debates about which performer recorded the best version of a classic tune. It likely takes a true jazz aficionado to appreciate asides like Becker’s remarks on the song “I Can Dream, Can’t I”:

I think I play in E flat, but could be G too. What’s the difference? Well, E flat might be better for the trumpet due to the range. My best memory of this tune now is (you won’t believe this) the Andrews Sisters recording, with Patti Andrews showing that she really could sing if they let her do it. (I know this because Paul Taylor made a fantastic dance called “Company B” to a collection of Andrews Sisters recordings and that’s one of the tunes—the dance is about WWII and soldiers and all that, very somber.)

The authors do include a nice feature in the e-book that makes these discussions more interesting by allowing the reader to listen to the tunes—over 200 of them—that they mention in-text. Unfortunately, this experience is not as seamless as one would hope. Clicking a tune in-text opens up your web browser and takes you to a version of the song that someone uploaded to YouTube. A few of the links had already been taken down when I navigated to them, and others made me watch a commercial before playing the tune. I found this to be a bit too disruptive to my reading experience, and so I only wound up listening to a fraction of the songs mentioned in the e-book, which is a shame because hearing “[On Green Dolphin Street](#)” juxtaposed to “[Now He Sings, Now He Sobs](#)” helped me make a lot more sense out of Becker and Faulkner’s e-mail exchange about the character of easy, relaxed gigs versus more up tempo, complex gigs.

Thinking Together ends unceremoniously. I suppose I had hoped for some kind of de facto coda, such as a message about the book going to press, but there is nothing about the last e-mail that announces any kind of conclusion or even next step. However, after reflecting on this for a moment, I found it entirely appropriate. *Thinking Together* is, after all, a compilation of e-mails; we ought not expect a standard narrative arc. And in this work, which (perhaps more than any other I have encountered that goes under the guise of “academics” or “social science”) is centered on the *process* of doing research and writing, the journey is the destination.

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